

## Union College Union | Digital Works

---

Honors Theses

Student Work

---

6-2012

# Discovery of Timbuktu: Geopolitical Rivalries and Myths

Katherine Van Meter

*Union College - Schenectady, NY*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalworks.union.edu/theses>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Tourism and Travel Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Van Meter, Katherine, "Discovery of Timbuktu: Geopolitical Rivalries and Myths" (2012). *Honors Theses*. 915.  
<https://digitalworks.union.edu/theses/915>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Union | Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Union | Digital Works. For more information, please contact [digitalworks@union.edu](mailto:digitalworks@union.edu).

Discovery of Timbuktu: Geopolitical Rivalries and Myths

By  
Katherine C. Van Meter

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of History

Department of History  
Union College  
June, 2012

## ABSTRACT

Van Meter, Katherine

### Discovery of Timbuktu: Geopolitical Rivalries and Myths

This thesis examines the exploration and discovery of Timbuktu primarily focusing on the travels and narrative of René Caillié the first European to publish his successful journey to Timbuktu in 1828. Timbuktu since the thirteenth century had become a romantic mystery for Europeans and stimulated massive interest in its discovery by major geographical Societies. Through a mixture of primary and secondary sources I am able to analyze the geopolitical rivalries and myths surrounding Timbuktu that would instigate the travels of twenty-five English, fourteen Frenchmen, two Americans and one German which the majority of resulted in death. Examining Caillié's published narrative provides the insight into traveling during this time-period and the political tensions existing between France and England that hindered rather than promoted self-exploration. Caillié would be the first European to successfully publish, not an easy feat as is demonstrated by the many failures before him.

However, the reception of his account and the nationalistic rivalry between France and England would diminish his rightful glory forever casting a shadow upon his work. By analyzing primary sources that review Caillié's account I am able to determine the animosities existing against the French geographical society and how this would invalidate Caillié's narrative. My claim that the nationalistic rivalries would continue to shroud the credit due to Caillié is proven by contemporary secondary sources that still exhibit anti-French sentiments when comparing the efforts and achievements of Caillié to English travelers.

The quest for Timbuktu resulted in mass lore being spread and sold throughout Europe as explores accounts were eagerly read in hopes of transporting readers to this romantic place. The tenacity of the Timbuctoo controversy, and the persistence of debate regarding its nature and location following Caillié's discovery further exemplify my belief that the quest for this geographical truth and drew its moral authority from the previously existing myths that Caillié disproved hence the negative reception to his account. These myths of a sublimely beautiful and wealthy African interior were necessary for the continuation of England's African interests prior to the Scramble for Africa.

- I. Intro to the Myth of Timbuktu
  - a. Origination of the lore surrounding Timbuktu
  - b. Institutionalizing Exploration: The Geographical Societies
  - c. The African Association
  - d. The Societé de Geographié de Paris
- II. René Caillié
  - a. Formative Experiences and Early Travels in Africa
  - b. Moorish Immersion
  - c. Inability to Receive Funding
- III. Caillié's Travels to Timbuktu
  - a. Moorish Identity
  - b. Overview of his Travels
  - c. Timbuktu and Major Laing
- IV. Reception
  - a. Paris 'Commission to authenticate Caillié's account
  - b. Reception to Caillié's narrative
  - c. Laing vs Caillié
  - d. John Barrow- The Most Adamant Critic
- V. Conclusion



RENEE CAILLIE.

Engraving from the original portrait of René Caillié, by J. B. Huet, 1830.

---

<sup>1</sup> Caillié, René . Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo. Vol.. I London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley. 1830

-portrait of René Caillié



**MR. CAILLIÉ MEDITATING UPON THE KORAN AND TAKING NOTES.**

London: Published by Colburn and Bentley, New Burlington Street, 1806.

---

<sup>2</sup> Caillié, Timbaktu. Vol.. II. pg.. 585- an sketch of Caillié as a Moor pg.

## I. Intro to the Myth of Timbuktu

### A) Origination of the lore surrounding Timbuktu:

The mythology and lore shrouding Timbuktu, and specifically the exaggeration of its importance and wealth, served to further propagate its lure as a place of mystery.

Timbuktu became the paradigm for inaccessible wealth among Europeans, which only served as a catalyst for a race among European powers to be the first to reach the city and return to share the wealth of knowledge. We may trace the origins of the myth of this 'El Dorado' of Africa back to 1324 when the Emperor of Mali, Mansa Musa, made his pilgrimage to Mecca through Cairo. In Cairo, the merchants and traders were awestruck by the amount of gold carried by the emperor:

Under the Mali ruler Mansa Musa, the empire's reputation for wealth spread far and wide. Mansa Musa' pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, in fulfillment of his personal duty as a Muslim, also became an occasion for him to display the exceptional wealth of his empire. As befitted a powerful ruler, he traveled with a large entourage...Even more lavish was the gold that Mansa Musa is reported to have taken along. For purchases and gifts he took 80 packages of gold each weighing 122 ounces. In addition, 500 slaves each carried a golden staff. When the entourage passed through Cairo, Mansa Musa gave away and spent so much gold that its value was depressed for years.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, Mansa Musa's extravagance had resounding effects; in Cairo it took a generation for the price of gold to recover, whereas Mansa had to borrow money in order to return home. However, the legends of the gold reserves of Africa remained until at least 1788 where in Europe, and most notably London, the story of Mansa Musa was told

---

<sup>3</sup> Schultz, Warren. Masa Musa's Gold in Mamluk Cairo: A Reappraisal of a World Civilizations Anecdote.



alongside that of Leo Africanus in his travel narrative *Description of Africa* 1526. Leo Africanus was a sixteenth century Moorish traveler who was a primary source of political, cultural and geographic knowledge of the Barbary Coast and Sudanic Africa, and he was a primary early source for European geographers due to a lack of rivaling sources. Leo Africanus' description of Timbuktu is integral in European lore surrounding Timbuktu, and his descriptions of the wealth of the fabled city helped to fuel the ferocity with which they pursued the infamous city of gold. While the myth of Mansa Musa was a story that fed the imaginations of Europeans and Egyptians alike, Leo Africanus was a respectable primary source who heavily influenced the academicians and geographers who drew their maps around these tales. Leo's "Description of Africa" provided geography, ethnography and history and introduced unknown Islamic knowledge to Western scholars. Despite his travels later being discredited or seen as outdated as Europeans further penetrated into Africa, his description of Timbuktu was a powerful one that resonated with Geographical Associations who had no other basis upon which to compare his tales. According to Leo Africanus, Timbuktu was founded by a king named Mansa Suleyman in the year 610 and was located twelve miles from a branch of the Niger River.<sup>4</sup> Africanus describes the culture of Timbuktu and particularly offers details surrounding the royal court and its anti-Semitism. Europeans were particularly responsive to nuggets of lore such as this:

Instead of coined money, pure gold nuggets are used; and for small purchases, cowrie shells which have been carried from Persia and of which 400 equal a ducat. Six and two-thirds of their ducats equal one Roman gold ounce<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Africanus, Leo-"Description of Africa-1526"

<sup>5</sup> Welch, Galbraith. The Unveiling of Timbuctoo: The Astounding Adventures of Renee Caillié. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc. 1991: pg.. 84:

Supported and magnified by reports sent by European traders and consuls from Northern Africa, Leo Africanus' description came to represent for European readers the treasures which were available, and waiting to be discovered, in the West African interior.

Early European travelers journeyed in search of knowledge for God, country and Queen during the late fifteenth to sixteenth centuries. They traveled across the vast oceans in search for new lands, peoples, and raw materials to supplement Britain's economy and lifestyles. The travelers published accounts of their voyages which often became bestsellers as readers craved to read the novel and exciting stories of these travelers' encounters with exotic places and peoples.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as a result of such a demand, the traveler's account became established as a new literary genre in England as European travelers during this time period embarked on voyages to Africa, the Near and Far East as well as the South Sea Islands and the Americas. The enormous amount of territory covered by the Europeans shows the enthusiasm for such travels, and suggests as well the different purposes for travelling. The quest for knowledge and power would over time dictate a traveler's agenda, whether the journey was for religious, geographical, botanical or trading aspirations. European travelers presented information about the various non-European places and the cultures, societal structures and moral attributes that they encountered among the native inhabitants while linking their observations to broader questions of race and religion. As modern historians assess the observations of these early modern travelers, and as we seek to understand these

---

<sup>6</sup> Harry Liebersohn, *The Travelers' World Europe to the Pacific*. New York: Harvard University Press, 2008. Pg.. 12

remarkable primary sources, we must look beyond the travelers' words as their lives and the societal context of their voyages are perhaps just as important.

The discovery of humanity in all of its vast cultural and sociological diversity encompassed a grand journey which particularly included the process of looking at the various elements of humanity in respects to individual goals and agendas. While travelers were purportedly individuals who journeyed in search of discovery, their travels were more often than not funded by organizations which sought to gain and make use of the power associated with the accumulation of knowledge and information. In assessing the accounts of travelers as historical documents, we must thus be attentive not only to the viewpoints of the travelers themselves, but also to the possible agendas and motivations of those organizations that funded their travels.

Likewise, we must be attentive to a subtle sort of cultural parochialism that creeps into the accounts of the travelers. Among Europeans, the idea of civility was crucial to their sense of self-identity and worldview, and their belief that they were among the most civilized peoples in the world provided them a pedestal from which they observed other cultures. Travelers would take great lengths to describe aspects of all cultures they visited, such as war, peace, marriage, nobility, religion, education, dress, sex, food, language, customs and money. This was the information that people, individuals or governments, were most interested in and would fund or publish. Travelers considered these components natural and important to the definition of a culture, and many travelers seemingly enjoyed making direct comparisons as well as judgments. The travelers were expected to survey all aspects of the cultures and places they were visiting such as;

Things humane, are such as Men are, or have, or have done or suffered in the world. Here therefore the various Nations, Persons, Shapes, Colours, Habits,

Rites, Religious, Complexions, Conditions, Politike and Oeconomike Customes, Languages, Letters, Arts, Merchandises, Wares, and other remarkeable Varities of Men and humane Affaires.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, we need to remain attentive to the art of embellishment in these tales of the travelers. Traveling was a journey, full of dangers and experiences, which the readers thrived on and expected, and such lurid details were things a traveler could offer to the reader at little cost. The successful traveler's account offered the reader an adventure yarn interwoven with more serious forays into geography and ethnology and so we must remain alert to avoid falling into the cadence of such story telling in the written works of our subject, the travelers.<sup>8</sup>

By the early nineteenth-century, European and French settlements were becoming permanent fixtures along the coast of Africa as these two global-powers sought the ultimate goals, the discovery of the termination of the Niger River and the discovery of Timbuktu, the fabled city of gold and a pinnacle of civilization that rivaled Rome. Before the race to conquer and claim lands in Africa, European geographical societies were committed to a longer and deadlier quest for knowledge. This knowledge was collected by individuals relying on their own devices and intellect and on the support of the indigenous peoples and Moorish tribes in order to return to either England or France alive, which a majority of these travelers did not manage to accomplish and thus their accounts were forever lost. Reflecting back upon the colonization of Africa, it's hard to not contextualize its conquest under the pretext of capitalistic expansion of dominant

---

7 Andrew Hadfield. *Amazons, Savages, and Machiavels: Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550-1630 An Anthology*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2001. 38

8 Hadfield, *Amazons, Savages, and Machiavels* , 20

European powers. However, the quest for knowledge is what funded the majority of expeditions into Central Africa. Examination of the maps of this time period shows the complete lack of knowledge regarding this part of the world. Geographical societies in both Europe and France were not only in the quest to expand the horizon of European civilization and culture. They were in a race against each other for the credit associated with the achievement. Travelers went forth at the expense of their patrons; and outside agencies were impeded from infringing upon the potential success of the individual. In addition the potential glory was not to be shared, and the ultimate glory was thought to lie in discovering a fabled city in which no European explorer had set foot and returned to share his tale since the Middle Ages. The mystery and lore around Timbuktu promised great fame for the individual and society that successfully sent a traveler to this El Dorado of Africa.<sup>9</sup>

#### B) Institutionalizing Exploration: The Geographical Societies

The way in which geographical knowledge served European societies during the eighteenth century, also known as the Era of Enlightenment, was more than just for the practical purposes of navigation. Previously viewed solely as a navigational skill that merely facilitated scientific discovery, the inchoate science of geography then became transformed by the political and religious upheavals that rocked Europe in the seventeenth century. Geography's place in the educational programs of European universities began to reflect its status as an intellectual arena within which weighty moral, philosophical and religious matters could be debated. By the eighteenth century,

---

<sup>9</sup> Kryza, Frank. The Race for Timbuktu: The Search of Africa's City of Gold. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006: pg.. 1

the emerging science of geography became further involved in moral and philosophical debate that focused on discussions about human development within and beyond Europe and on the relative merits of different societies, cultures and civilizations. At the same time an interest in travel as an educational activity spread from the European aristocracy into the ranks of the newly enriched urban bourgeoisie. From this emerged the 'Grand Tour' of the Mediterranean, heartlands of the ancient world so beloved by wealthier and lettered European men and women. Partly as a result of these developments, the simple idea of geography as navigation gave way to a new formulation of geography as exploration. This was a shift of emphasis rather than a fundamental transformation but it reflected and engendered an entirely new geographical language and rationale. While scientific discoveries might have emerged as more or less fortunate by-products of navigation, such discoveries were viewed as the planned and considered objectives of the purposeful, self-consciously scientific exploration that developed during the eighteenth century, backed up by new cartographic and navigational techniques and by the substantial resources of modern nation-states.

#### C) The African Association:

On June 9, 1788 at St. Alban's Tavern a meeting occurred which would mark the beginnings of early European interest in trade in the interior regions of Africa. Sir Joseph Banks, Henry Beaufoy, General Conway, The Earl of Galloway and other notable men of England who were members of the Saturday's Club gathered in earnest to form the African Association. It was described by a member as:

A few individuals, strongly impressed with a conviction of the practicability and utility of thus enlarging the fund of human knowledge, have formed the Plan of an Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa.<sup>10</sup>

For these esteemed and curious men to whom, “the objects of inquiry which engage our attention the most... [are] those parts of the world, which have not, to our knowledge been hitherto explored,”<sup>11</sup> Africa was a continent almost entirely “unvisited and unknown,” creating a tabula rasa waiting to be mapped out by their discoveries.<sup>12</sup> They tasked themselves with the duty to send out expeditions with the purpose of collecting information that would lead to geographical advances and open up the interior of the African continent. The Committee had been entranced by tales of the city of Timbuktu and of the endless supply of gold available in the heart of Africa, “an article that commands, in all markets of the civilized world, a constant and unlimited scale”.<sup>13</sup> There was no limit to the eagerness of the Association to send forth men into this unexplored wilderness in order to discover these cities of gold and furnish the world with geographical knowledge of Africa. The African Association as it would be known was validated in 1797 with the success of their traveler Mungo Park, a traveler who would inspire a cult-like following that is present to modern day.<sup>14</sup> The African Association had spent eleven years attempting to advance from the ancient influences of Herodotus’

---

<sup>10</sup> Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, Proceedings of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa (London : printed by C. Macrae, 1790), 8.

<sup>11</sup> The Association, Proceedings 1790, B2.

<sup>12</sup> The Association, Proceedings 1790, B2, 6.

<sup>13</sup> The Association, Proceedings 1790, 205.

<sup>14</sup> Mungo Park killed by zombies. popular culture

flawed accounts of Africa's geography and create their own modern map for future travelers to follow. The agenda that was decided upon by the Association that day at St. James Tavern would be the one thing that they were certain about; that they wanted to determine the course, rise and termination of the Niger River and to discover the fabled city of Timbuktu.<sup>15</sup>

The changes that would be made to this agenda with each successive traveler were based on what they learned from experience and from the gathering of new information and sources. Traveling was not a simple affair, as demonstrated in the many failures and hardships endured while attempting to discover the interior of Africa. Much planning and preparation, and a great many resources were necessary for the execution of a successful expedition. With the success of Park, the African Association would become protective of their travelers in the field who represented not only a wealth of potential knowledge but themselves a significant monetary investment waiting to be returned in London. As the competitiveness to be the first European to reach Timbuktu increased, we see the infrastructures created in Europe and abroad to support travelers looking to only provide assistance to particular travelers who represented the wealthy patron because sizable amounts of money has been invested in these travelers in the faith that they would eventually be credited with this ultimate achievement. The African Association would struggle with its original mission due to their travelers either dying abroad or not completing the goal. Even their hero Park died in dramatic fashion along the Niger River amidst the gunfire and arrows of the natives.

---

<sup>15</sup> Sattin, Anthony. *The Gates of Africa*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005. pg. 43



#### D) Societé de Géographie de Paris

The power of Napoleon, and with it the supremacy of France, was scarcely overthrown, and the titanic contests to gratify the ambition of one man at the expense of the intellectual progress of humanity were scarcely at an end, before an honorable rivalry awoke once more and new scientific and commercial expeditions were set in motion. A new era had commenced, the era of exploration at which the pride of one's country was at stake. The country that was able to fill in the blank maps of Africa with the discoveries of their own travelers would bring itself into the forefront of geography and civilization. The creation of a Societé de Géographie de Paris<sup>16</sup> to advance the national interests of France in geographical pursuits was proposed in 1785 by Jean-Nicholas Bauche, who was the geographer and cartographer of Louis the XVI. The society did not actually come into existence until December 15th, 1821 at the Hotel de Ville in Paris, and its members were among the most prestigious scholars of the time. They included names such as Cuvier, Chapsel, Fourier, Humboldt, Champollion, Chateaubirand and Edmé Jomard, a cartographer who accompanied Napoleon on his expedition to Egypt. Their claim to be the first and oldest Geographical Society would antagonize the African Association who had established themselves in 1788, and this rivalry would be demonstrated in the race for Timbuktu. In this competition between foreign geographical societies, the Paris Geographical Society was at a clear disadvantage, for the African Association had in fact been active since their founding meeting, sending explorers with some success into the Interior of Africa to map the termination of the Niger and discover the geographical coordinates of

---

<sup>16</sup> To be called the Paris Geographical Society throughout the rest of this paper.

Timbuktu. However, in 1828 the Parisian geographers received a telegram that solidified their legitimacy as a geographical society: René Caillié had returned alive from Timbuktu. Ironically, the Paris Geographical Society was not the patron of Caillié during his travels, and was, in fact, unaware of the progress he had been making during his travels. Such nuances did not stifle their triumphant self-congratulations, however.

The first third of the nineteenth century has highlighted the dynamism of British exploration in West Africa. Great Britain, which then appeared as the largest economic and political power also championed the interest in Africa. Yet the English had no monopoly and other nations were not entirely absent from this field. France, in particular, feared being marginalized in African explorations; since it recovered Senegal in 1818, it began to give some attention to the continent, although it did little to encourage globetrotter vocations. Only the Geographical Society, located in Paris and modeled on its English counterpart, announced in 1824 it would award a prize to the first traveler who came to Timbuktu and provided information on the region. But the work of Mungo Park (1771-1806), translated into French, inspired a young man from Saintonge, René Caillié (1799-1838). From very humble extraction (his father was a baker) and apprenticed from a young age to a shoemaker, Caillié aspired to rise above a particularly bleak childhood. He overcame boredom by flipping through travelogues, stopping often on incomplete maps of Africa. His attention was soon fixed on Timbuktu. Although we detect a complacency-tinged lyricism when he says "My resolution was taken to reach Timbuktu or die", it was nonetheless a very determined passenger who sailed on the ship *La Loire*

in 1816, and landed in Senegal penniless, where he labored until 1824 to earn enough savings to continue the journey inland.<sup>17</sup>

## Chapter II: René Caillié

“To Lovers of adventure and novelty, Africa displays a most ample field”  
James Rennell

On April 20th, 1828 a young Frenchman traveling in disguise passed with an Arab caravan through the gates of Timbuktu. He had in the time period of one year, from his embarkment from the French factory on the Rio Nunez, traveled approximately 1,500 miles. He had walked 1,000 miles of that distance, risking his life with every step he took and every word he spoke. He wrote:

I now saw this capital of the Sudan to reach which had so long been the object of my wishes. On entering this mysterious city, which is an object of curiosity and research to the civilized nations of Europe, I experienced an indescribable satisfaction. I never before felt a similar emotion and my transport was extreme. I was obliged, however, to restrain my feelings, and to God alone did I confide my joy.<sup>18</sup>

René Caillié at the age of twenty-eight with no patronage or substantial funds had succeeded in a mission that had left little but a trail of bodies further amplifying the ever-increasing desire to be the first European to return from the fabled city of gold, Timbuktu. Before examining the large-scale implications of Caillié’s success at returning

---

<sup>17</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu. Vol..

<sup>18</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu. Vol.. II. pg.. 52

alive from Timbuktu we need to analyze his narrative of the journey in order to understand the motivations and methodology used throughout his journey for his success would be the catalyst of an international rivalry less over geography and knowledge than nationalism and pride.

#### A: Formative Experiences and Early Travels in Africa

Caillié himself in his narrative describes his upbringing as humble and unfortunate. Having lost both of his parents at an early age, the only education he received was through church charity organizations. After learning to read and write he was sent to learn a trade. Caillié describes his leisure time as solely occupied by stories of voyages and travel Inspired early by *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, “which inflamed my young imagination: I was impatient to encounter adventures like him; nay, I already felt an ambition to signalize myself by some important discovery springing up in my heart.”<sup>19</sup> The lure of Africa was not lost on Caillié, he scrounged for geographical books and maps and the more he delved into them the more he became focused on Africa for he was attracted by “countries marked as desert or unknown.” He became set on traveling into the continent of Africa despite all warnings and risks.<sup>20</sup> Though he was little prepared for the daunting physical and mental strength required for travel in Africa upon his first attempt, “the torments which I had already endured led me to reflect on the still greater hardships to which I was about to expose myself...but my passion for travelling began to revive; the perusal of *Mungo Park* gave new strength to my

---

<sup>19</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*. Vol. I. pg. 2

<sup>20</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*. Vol. I. pg. 2

projects,”<sup>21</sup> and he prevailed to attach himself to an English expedition in 1818 led by M. Adrien Patartieu who was bringing supplies to the King of Bondou in order to relieve Major Gray. While Patartieu could not offer Caillié any salary or promise of future engagements, Caillié was “happy to seize so favourable an opportunity of visiting unknown countries and participating in an expedition of discovery.”<sup>22</sup>

The expedition had started disastrously for Major Gray, who had penetrated into the area of the Bondou, and the almamy then extorted the expedition under the pretext of there being an unpaid debt to him by the English Government. Major Gray was thus looted of all his supplies, and he was forced to send officers to Senegal to requisition new supplies.

Caillié, unaware of the already politically tense situation he had volunteered his services for, joined the caravan, estimated at seventy-two persons and thirty-two camels; “our camels were so laden with goods, that we had been able to take with us but a very small quantity of water.”<sup>23</sup> Upon reaching their destination within the Bondou, M. Patartieu, according to Caillié, was “not deficient in these qualities, was preparing to pursue his route directly towards Bakel,” until Major Gray intervened and ordered the party to go into the capital Boulibane where the almamy resided. Major Gray was under the misapprehension that the almamy would keep his word and let the travelers pass after paying the extorted tribute.<sup>24</sup> However, as foreseen by Patartieu, the almamy was not content with the offerings and proceeded to extort payment daily from the British whilst refusing them safe passage. Finally, Major Gray was able to negotiate passage out of

---

<sup>21</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 5

<sup>22</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 6

<sup>23</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 7

<sup>24</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 10

Boulibane, but not in favor of the caravan. In the opinion of Caillié “it was evidently the almamy’s design to cause us to be plundered and perhaps murdered.”<sup>25</sup>

The British resolved to force their way out of the camp but these efforts were quickly thwarted; “the war-drums were already heard...crowds of armed men hastened to obey the summons...in less than two hours a numerous army was on foot ready to rush us.”<sup>26</sup> They found themselves escorted by guard to the Fouta Toro on a route dictated by the almamy. At night the caravan took revenge by setting fire to all their merchandise in sight of the Foulah’s guarding them who had intended to further extort the travelers of their wares.<sup>27</sup> Major Gray’s incompetence compared to that of his second-lieutenant was apparent to even Caillié as the caravan formed a council to form a plan of action. Major Gray announced his plan to abandon the caravan, in order to make it to the French factory at Bakel. Finally, due to an ingenious con by Partarrieu, the caravan was able to escape into the night and march safely to Bakel where they were welcomed with enthusiasm by the French.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately for Caillié, “the rainy season...shed its baleful influence over me as well as the others,” and he was struck by a near fatal fever which required that he quit the expedition and return to France to recuperate, and thus ended Caillié’s first venture into Africa. It would not be until 1824 that Caillié would return to Senegal

---

<sup>25</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 12

<sup>26</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu Vol. I pg. 11

<sup>27</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu Vol. I pg. 13

“In our just indignation against them we would rather have suffered death than have allowed them to save so much as a handkerchief from the flames.”

<sup>28</sup> Welch, The Unveiling of Timbuctoo, pg. 84: Partarrieu was a enfant de Senegal aka mulatto and Welch is racist in his description of him attributing his success to Caillié’s “shrewd brain”

seeking that which, “at the bottom of my heart, I still cherished, my design of visiting the interior of Africa”<sup>29</sup>

Caillié did not seek an expedition to attach himself to as he had previously. Instead he approached the Baron Jacques-Francois Roger for support and authorization to travel under the auspices and support of the French government. Caillié was confident in the success of his approach, having learned from his reading of Park’s account and from his own experience with the Gray expedition that the clever individual might escape the scrutiny to which large parties headed by blundering European aristocrats were subject. Baron Roger was the military governor of Senegal as well as an active correspondent with the Paris Geographical Society. He was constantly communicating with Edme Jomard, “on the need in Senegal for ‘capitalists, especially industrious men, for France to count on another rich colony,’ and to ‘appreciate and facilitate the great enterprise, the colonization, that is, the civilization of a part of Africa”<sup>30</sup> Caillié laid his plans before the Baron Roger,

I might go and live among the Braknas and learn the Arabic language and the religious ceremonies of the Moors, in order that I might subsequently be able to lull their jealous mistrust, and thus penetrate the more easily into the interior of Africa.<sup>31</sup>

Caillié’s valuable insight from watching the follies of the Gray expedition, which was plundered at every village, was to remark upon an extreme Moorish distrust of Europeans and Christians. Instead of brazenly trying to oppose their beliefs and arouse suspicions, Caillié intended to integrate himself and learn the important religious customs of the

---

<sup>29</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 20

<sup>30</sup> Staum, The other, 223

<sup>31</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I. pg. 20

Moors, allowing him to penetrate into the interior of Africa without impediment. While the Baron Roger saw the ingenuity and imagination in Caillié's plan, he also saw the gross inherent dangers of impersonating a constituent of a religiously dissimilar group. Caillié was relying on his own wit to spin a believable tale so that the Moors might even accept him into their faith and teach him the ways of Mohammad. However, the price of being discovered in his deception would be Caillié's life. Baron Roger was appalled at the risk:

[He] strove in the kindest manner to damp my zeal. He represented to me that the business in which I had embarked offered chances of fortune which it was imprudent to sacrifice; and that my youth and inexperience might moreover ruin my future prospects, and perhaps endanger my life.<sup>32</sup>

Baron Roger was unable to dampen the ardor and determination of this young traveler, and provided some goods for Caillié to add to his traveler kit, which were small items that could be traded with the natives.<sup>33</sup> Caillié, upon departing from Senegal, was under the strong belief that he was following instructions from Baron Roger and had the protection of his government. However, providing Caillié with trinkets for his journey did not signify the support of France in his endeavors. Eight months later Caillié returned from his immersion method of learning from the Moorish tribe and was horrified to learn of the Baron Roger's departure for France.

Was I then estranged from my country by the pains I had taken to serve it? Could I be suspected of being a mere adventurer? And had I not eight months before received instructions from Baron Roger, who promised me the protection of the government?<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu* Vol. I. pg. 20

<sup>33</sup> Welch, *The Unveiling of Timbuctoo*, New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers Inc, pg. 92

<sup>34</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 140



International politics surrounding African travel, the discovery of Timbuktu and the course of the Niger were heightening and the rivalry between France and Britain growing. Caillié would learn of the implications of all of this for travelers not hand-picked by a major society upon his second request to the French government at Senegal.<sup>35</sup> However, before examining the repercussions of that event, we need to examine the eight months Caillié spent absorbing the culture of the Moors to understand his success at reaching and, more importantly, returning alive from Timbuktu in 1828.

#### B. Moorish Immersion

From August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1824 to May 11<sup>th</sup> of 1824, Caillié remained with the Braknas tribe of Moors and professed to be a conscientious renegade seeking religious instruction. The Braknas tribe was established north of Senegal and was principal in the gum traffic that was carried on in that region. The risk Caillié was taking in falsely professing his allegiance to Islam and fear of discovery of this deception haunted him at every step. He had to be very careful in how he told his story because his life depended upon it. He spent the first few months traveling in search of Moors from the Brakna tribe to whom he expressed his desire to be schooled in the ways of Islam. While they didn't outright agree, they allowed Caillié to accompany them to where their tribe and King were encamped. He would make the final decision, all of this for a price.

Turning northward into the great desert, Caillié began to rehearse the story he would tell when he reached the Brakan camp, fully knowing the gravity of the situation and realizing he would be either believed or murdered. His first test was in the village of

---

<sup>35</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu Vol. I pg. 141

Neyreh, where the chief of the village questioned Caillié's purpose for traveling and his desire to embrace the Islamic faith. Here Caillié told his story for the first time: he was the son of a wealthy French family and upon reading the Koran in a French translation he was intensely overcome by "its great truths." Now, with his father's passing, he had come with his inheritance to Senegal to learn from the pious and wise Braknas's.<sup>36</sup>

However, on his journey to Africa he had been the victim of a shipwreck which lost him a portion of his wealth to the sea, although the remainder was in storage at St.Louis while he learned religious instruction from the Braknas and they aided him in learning the way to Allah. Caillié masterly wove this tale that was hinged on several innocuous yet vital factors, and an important detail that must not be dismissed is Caillié's profession of the Muslim faith. If this portion of his tale was not believed his death was ensured. While aiding in the enlightenment of someone who had already renounced Christianity could be considered a good deed, a false profession of faith was heresy as Caillié learned from the first marabout who questioned his faith; "he highly approved my design, and endeavored to impress me with the notion that God was extremely gracious to me in thus delivering me from the flames to which the Christians are destined"<sup>37</sup> Secondly, Caillié was ingenious in informing the Brakna's that his inherited wealth was in storage in St.Louis while he was learning the ways of Muhhamed. If the Brakna's took Caillié in this meant there was a potential profit for them, and thus for Caillié this reputed wealth represented the potential to win a guarantee of protection, so that nothing grave would happen to him, or so he dared to hope,

---

<sup>36</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 42

<sup>37</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I. pg. 29

I perceived that what pleased them most was the account of my wealth...and concluded by assuring me of his protection while I should remain in his dominions, and particularly against his great marabout. He told me not to be afraid of any of his subjects; to which I replied that I feared no one but God. This answer pleased him; he took my hand with an air of satisfaction, exclaiming at the same time: Maloum, Abd-Allahi (that is right, Abd Allahi)<sup>38</sup>

Life amongst the suspicious and fanatic Moorish shepherds was by no means easy. The traveler, who had great difficulty in keeping his daily journal, was obliged to resort to all manner of subterfuges to obtain permission to explore the terrain in which the camp was located. His first method of avoiding suspicion for wandering the countryside was in the pretense of medicine. Having administered a simple herbal remedy for the King he was soon requested for consults by all the princes of the camps<sup>39</sup>. Caillié's transient celebrity status allowed him the advantage of exploring the country under the pretense of collecting medicinal herbs.<sup>40</sup> However, this was not a fool proof method and news of his wanderings resulted in Caillié being brought before a suspicious King who questioned his need to go so far for herbs that were closer to the camp;

Some of the Moors who were present, perceived that I had a knot in my pagne, and catching hold of it, they asked me what I had got there; and then, without giving me time to reply, they untied it themselves.<sup>41</sup> "What do you want with these?" said they. These are to take to the white men when you go back to them;" and without waiting for an explanation, they threw away the seeds...I assured

---

<sup>38</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I. pg. 45 Caillié had chosen the name Abd-Allahi to travel under because he hoped its translation would appeal to the Muslim sense of piety. It translates into 'slave of God'.

<sup>39</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol.I pg. 49

<sup>40</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 49

<sup>41</sup> Welch, Astounding, pg. 94: "He wore a coussabe(rudimentary shirt without collar or sleeves), loose drawers, and a supplementary wrap around called a pagne"

them that when I came to them, my connection with whites had ceased, and that I could never return to their country.<sup>42</sup>

This would be far from the first time that Caillié was accused of being a Christian spy. In fact, it would become a daily occurrence, each time requiring quick wit on Caillié's part to avoid detection and to learn prudence for the multitude of situations he would find himself in. Maintaining his journal was of the utmost importance as he needed to record all of the measurements and observations that were required to validate a traveler's travels. Being observed in the action of writing in non-Arabic characters provoked further suspicion of Caillié who had to earnestly protest that he was not a Christian spy. He soon implemented a system for journaling;

From that time forward, when I wanted to write, I took care to get behind a bush, and at the least noise I hid my notes and took up my beads, pretending to be saying my prayers. This feigned devotion procured me much commendation from those who surprised me; but it was painful to me to perform such a part.<sup>43</sup>

In the eight months Caillié would spend with the Braknas, there is not much evidence of formal instruction in Mohammed as their ramshackle and continually mobile way of life prevented any serious study. However, while Caillié's cover-story was in religious training, his intentions were vastly different. Really he needed to become familiar with and habituated to the ritual gestures and behavior of the Moors as well as to learn Arabic if he wanted to go any further into the interior of Africa. While immersing himself in this culture, Caillié was also becoming accustomed to a manner of living that the majority of European travelers found discomforting. Many of them had to spend time

---

<sup>42</sup> Cailie, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 51

<sup>43</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 52

preparing themselves in Europe in order to endure these hardships.<sup>44</sup> Caillié's indoctrination into Moorish culture paid off, as he developed an iron stomach against the lack of sanitation that was inseparable from nomadic life, "the Moors are naturally filthy...they disgusted me to such a degree by their uncleanly ways, that I have often suffered hunger, rather than accept a drink which they had prepared so filthily."<sup>45</sup>

In Europe, the reviews for Caillié's time spent with the Moor's of Brakna admitted to the useful ethnology of his account due to his descriptions of the Moor's and their culture. It was Caillié's description of the Gum trade that was found to be of the greatest interest for, "the following particulars, however, concerning the gum, in trading for which the absurd competition between the French merchants has been most injurious."<sup>46</sup> Caillié not only was able to provide Europe with an accurate description of the process, especially laying out the cultural context and intentions of the Moors in their actions.

The Gum Trade officially commenced in the month of January and concluded on the thirty-first of July, during this time-period merchant ships will arrived at the port and remained anchored until the duty was paid by the ship. This tax was governed based upon the tonnage of vessel per ship and until this custom was cleared no trade could occur. An already complicated process fraught with tensions and trickery between the dealers and the Moors would be further complicated towards the end of May, when the King arrived at the port. The dealers were obliged to feed him and all of his attendants and carter to his

---

<sup>44</sup> Welch, *Unveiling of Timbuctoo*, pg. 100

<sup>45</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 68

<sup>46</sup> *Foreign Quarterly Review*, pg. 103.

individual whims, one of which was a daily tax known as “the king’s supper”.<sup>47</sup> The King made his rounds of the dealers ships, receiving presents and goods. If he was offended in the slightest by a dealer he could cut off the traffic. In addition, the King levied another tax, the “forced present” requiring from the dealer one hundred pieces or more of Guinea cloth or else he broke off the trade. Amidst the constant disagreements that arose between the Moors and the dealers and the competitiveness that drove the dealers to dishonorable trade methods in which they would attempt to garner the Moors’ partnership by bestowing lavish attention and presents upon them, the dealers themselves fell victim to the capricious ways of the Moors. In their eagerness to please the Moors, they entered into direct competition with other dealers allowing the Moors to “become more greedy and obstinate” and giving them the confidence to continue to drive the price of the gum up.<sup>48</sup> While the dealers may have felt they were purchasing the gum at a reasonable price, Caillié points out that when also considering the monetary cost of all the presents and expenses in food not only for the King and their attendants, the cost became exorbitantly higher than it would be in St Louis, “The Europeans frequently suffer considerable losses, and will continue to do so as long as the trade is founded on fraud.”<sup>49</sup> Caillié pointedly remarked that if the European traders would spend less time attempting to devise new cons and trickery to try on the ever vigilant Moors then they would stop suffering considerable monetary losses. Caillié saw it as the duty of Europeans to develop this commerce in a more honorable way:

---

<sup>47</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I. pg. 134- “the king’s supper was two or pieces of guinea cloth”

<sup>48</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 136

<sup>49</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 140

It is impossible to deal honestly with the Moors. Government alone could set matters right, by forming a company, in which each member might hold a share proportionate to his capital, and then appointing two agents to traffic at each port, subject to the inspection of a government-officer, whose business it would be to see that the conditions on each side were fulfilled. By these means, competition would be annihilated, and the expenses considerably reduced, because a single ship would be sufficient at each port, and the gum would be conveyed to St. Louis in boats. The Moors would be unwilling to submit to any alteration at first, but when they should have ascertained that there were no other intention than that of dealing fairly with them, a mutual confidence would soon take place between them and the dealers, which would permit the latter to behave in a manner more suitable to the dignity of the French character.<sup>50</sup>

While Caillié provides a detailed analysis of the Gum Trade, even presenting the solution above to his readers, what's more interesting from a modern context is the lack of information that is crucial to the Gum Trade, such information pertaining to the harvesting of the gum. Contrary to the previous beliefs that within the desert were forests of gum-bearing trees, instead the gum grew on dry, sand ground in elevated parts of the desert. This information was not readily given however, "I attribute this to distrust; for the Moors conceive that the Europeans wish to take possession of their country as being the finest in the world."<sup>51</sup> The little information pertaining to the harvesting of gum was pried out of a woman in the tribe and it mostly described the hierarchy among the Moors and the Negroes during the harvest instead of practical methods of extracting gum from the trees and their specific location.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I, pg. 137

<sup>51</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I. pg. 90

<sup>52</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 92

After nearly eight months traveling in disguise, Caillié was in utter destitution and dependent upon alms for survival amongst the Moors. His clothes were in rags and he felt that he needed to send word about his condition back to Senegal.<sup>53</sup> Caillié requested leave to return to Senegal to get new clothes and send for his goods that were being held in St. Louis but he learned that leaving a Moorish tribe is as difficult as imbedding yourself in one, from the Moor's perspective. Caillié was adroit in his handling of the suspicious Moors, who were worried he would try to escape and return to the heathen Christians. He promptly boarded a French ship at the port, and obtained the bare-minimum of goods he needed as well as a messenger to bring his report to the governor of Senegal and convey his urgent need of goods.<sup>54</sup> Recognizing the need for rapidity in order to avoid arousing further suspicion and anxiety from his guide, Caillié opted to not wait for a reply to his message and returned to camp to the great surprise of the Moors who, "on my return, however, I was welcomed with many and hearty salutations. The Moors were persuaded when I went away that I should never come back, and that I should escape from the port...When they saw me again they all testified their great joy, and no longer doubted my conversion."<sup>55</sup> For Caillié the pinnacle moment of this journey occurred following his return to the camp when he was questioned about the conduct of Christians at the port and whether they attempted to lure him back to luxury and sin. To this, Caillié's response, "I liked better to eat a little sangleh with Musulmans than to return to the Christians to live in luxury; and I hoped this sacrifice would be pleasing to God," earned him the acceptance of the Moors and dispelled all doubts as to the sincerity

---

<sup>53</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I. pg. 116

<sup>54</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 110

<sup>55</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I 117



of his conversion.<sup>56</sup> By enduring silently the pains, discomforts, fear and religious differences in the name of exploration and science, Caillié had succeeded in his goal of ingraining himself with a Moorish tribe to the point where he had earned their trust, lowering their suspicious and capricious nature that noted their usual dealings with Europeans. His new status among the Moors allowed Caillié to strategize on the best use of this in terms of his goal of exploring the interior of Africa, “of visiting all the most interesting parts of the desert; travelling as a merchant and pilgrim to Mecca, and there effecting my return through Egypt into France.”<sup>57</sup> Caillié was confident that upon his arrival in St. Louis he would have the support of the French government awaiting him and eagerly joined a party in April that was making a trip to St. Louis. The Baknar’s suggested Caillié go to St. Louis in order to attend to his goods that he had left in storage while he learned the ways of Mohammed. His Moorish protectors were ready to collect on their coveted investment.<sup>58</sup> The surprise awaiting Caillié in St. Louis was a dangerous one, for the Baron Roger whom Caillié had imagined was his patron had returned to France indefinitely. With the Braknas awaiting his return and more importantly the arrival of his inheritance, Caillié found himself desperate for funding to implement the ingenious plan that was hinged on his acceptance and good relations with the Braknas.

### C: Inability to Receive Funding:

Caillié calculated he would need a sum of six thousand francs, which was equivalent at that time to two hundred and fifty pounds, with which he would purchase

---

<sup>56</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I 118

<sup>57</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I 119

<sup>58</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I 130

livestock and two slaves and establish himself as a merchant among the Braknas.

Returning to their tribe with his new wealth and further dedication to his studies would dispel any remaining qualms that had been causing them to doubt him. As he became established commercially with the tribe, they would allow him to accompany them on their commercial expeditions and Caillié would be able to penetrate into Africa in a state of safety never experienced by travelers up to that point. By traveling with a commercial expedition, “[Caillié] hoped to traverse this immense tract of desert, in more senses than one, to collect all the information [he] could of a commercial or geographical nature, and return to Europe through Egypt.”<sup>59</sup>

Baron Roger’s departure was unfortunate for Caillié for his replacement the interim-governor Monsieur Hougon was unaware of the scope of Caillié’s achievements thus far in the relatively short-time span of eight months and did not provide Caillié with the funds or support of the French government. His reasoning shattered Caillié’s patriotic core:

My strength’ he told me, ‘was inadequate to such an undertaking; besides, government had not authorised him to dispose of so large a sum for such a purpose; moreover, M.Beaufort had already recieved twenty thousand francs to enable him to carry into execution a similar project. ‘Would it not be unfair,’ he added, ‘to commission another person to undertake the same journey as that officer, and to furnish him the means of outstripping him? M. Beaufort is at Bakel; he has almost attained the goal; let him follow his fate and if he should ultimately fail, we will then see what government can do to facilitate your design.’<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I 141

<sup>60</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I 141: Beaufort’s plan of exploration was to reach the Niger in which his convoy would split into four groups that would then go into the four quarters of Africa and learning everything of

For Caillié the news was devastating. He had been living under the belief that he had the protection of the French government should he encounter the myriad of difficulties and dangers that were inherent with traveling in Africa in the nineteenth-century. The reality of his situation became readily apparent, as Abd-Allahi a Muslim convert ready to collect his inheritance and continue his path to Allah with the Brakna tribe who were expecting generous compensation.<sup>61</sup> Caillié was forced to spend several days in hiding from the Braknas who were “enraged at being imposed upon by my feigned zeal for their religion.”<sup>62</sup> While the vengeful nature of the Moors worried Caillié, he was more devastated by the betrayal he felt from his own country, “The coldness of my patrons, the ridicule of all kinds to which I was exposed: nay, some went so far as to assert that I had undergone the initiatory operation of Islamism.”<sup>63</sup> Despite his outrage at the treatment he had received from the interim-governor, Caillié applied for his board to be paid for and was offered a job overseeing negro workers at a French settlement in the town of Richard Tol. A paltry sum and the prospect of further delaying his journey frustrated Caillié but, as he had no other means to support himself, he acquiesced.<sup>64</sup> At last, news of the Baron Roger’s return from France to Senegal reached Caillié, “At this intelligence I was

---

interest of “the dark continent”. Jomard the French geographer critiqued the plan by stating that “de Beaufort had better first get to the Niger,” which he never did becoming another victim to the mapping of Africa.

<sup>61</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 130 :

“On our way we passed the night in a camp...and I heard a Moor who was talking of me say, ‘I should like him to die in my tent when he comes back with his merchandise.’ ‘Do not say so,’ replied a woman. ‘Why not,’ rejoined the moor, ‘would not he be very well off? He would go to paradise, and I should have his goods.’

<sup>62</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. 142

<sup>63</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 142

<sup>64</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu. Vol. I pg. 143

transported with joy; I ran about in all directions in search of a vessel to take me to St.Louis, and if I could I would have swum thither.”<sup>65</sup>

There is little doubt that Caillié had been clinging to the belief his country had not failed him, but rather, a misunderstanding had occurred due to the absence of Baron Roger who was his patron. Imagine the devastation of Caillié after he presented all of his notes from his stay with the Braknas, and describing his success at being accepted as a Moor leading into his plan for his great journey penetrate into the interior of Africa, only for Baron Roger to deny all of his requests. Gaibraith Welch, author of “The Unveiling of Timbuctoo: The Astounding Adventures of René Caillié” discusses what she calls a woeful blunder on the part of Baron Roger, a blunder that nearly cost France not just the glory of beating the British at their own game but territorial losses as well:

“But he had to admit that by his dullness of perception and his evasiveness he so antagonized the greatest explorer of his age-first encouraging Caillié by implied promises and then repudiating him- that he nearly lost France and the King another colony. Several colonies. The wide lands of Western Sudan and the upper Niger. All the undiscovered country upon which Caillié, the first white man set his foot is now French. Roger, by discouraging him did all he could to turn these discoveries into the hands of England.”<sup>66</sup>

The ramifications of Baron Roger’s decision to deny patronage to Caillié could have chartered a very different course in history had it caused Caillié to travel under the auspices of England. Luckily for France, the governor of the English colony at Sierra-Leone, Sir Neil Campbell, to whom Caillié approached with his plan also denied him

---

<sup>65</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 143

<sup>66</sup> Welch, *The Unveiling of Timbuctoo*. pg. 110

based partially on the extravagance of his scheme but more importantly, “he spoke of Major Laing, from whom he said it would be unfair to attempt to snatch the glory of first arriving at Timbuctoo, and on this ground he rejected my proposal.”<sup>67</sup> Baron Roger’s may have cringed upon reading Caillié’s account in which he stated “he succeeded without the help of anyone!” but the English would have to answer too for their refusal to aide Caillié.<sup>68</sup> When Caillié returned from Timbuktu the international crisis that occurred can be traced back to these moments when both governments pledged their allegiances to dead-men-walking and were thus unprepared for the shocking news of Caillié’s success in 1828.

For Caillié, none of the political rivalries were relevant to his goal of exploring and making advances in the geography of Africa but, as a French patriot, he found relief at the English refusal,

I felt myself more free: I thanked the heaven that I was now able to break off my engagement with foreigners, to whom I was indebted for their generous hospitality, but who might perhaps in return have laid claim to the glory of a discovery, with which I had hoped to do honour to France.<sup>69</sup>

Caillié, himself was not oblivious to the stakes if he were to succeed, as he mentions in the passage cited above. Although he declares himself to be loyal to France, he makes it clear that had the English funded his trip then the credit for his travels would have gone to England and the African Association. He understood that if he wanted to complete “son grand voyage” he would have to undertake the costs and risks without patronage or

---

<sup>67</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu. pg. 145

<sup>68</sup> Welch, The Unveiling of Timbuctoo. pg. 110

<sup>69</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I. pg. 145

protection.<sup>70</sup> Despite these setbacks, Caillié became more resolute, having been informed of the premium being offered by the Geographical Society of Paris that offered a ten-thousand franc reward to the first European to return from Timbuktu and unveil the fabled city to the world.<sup>71</sup> Refusing to be further impeded by the political rivalries standing in the way of his journey, Caillié used the Geographical Society of Paris' premium as impetus to depart, "Dead or alive, it shall be mine...These hopes, these visions of glory, of patriotism...left me know rest...I determined to undertake it entirely at my own expense."<sup>72</sup>

Timbuktu represented a lurid mystery to many during this time. Those like Caillié were attracted to the challenge of discovering Timbuktu and the pride of providing new geographies that had never been mapped by Europeans. For traders living in the British and French colonies in Western Africa, penetrating the barrier to Timbuktu was not about the idealized vision of mere exploring; it was about economics. These traders believed Timbuktu was a great market from which they were being excluded by native pride and secretiveness. Timbuktu's discovery represented for them further quashing of black defiance and resistance in their colonies along with the possibility of great wealth. While the British and French societies were the most renowned for their travel efforts and advancement in geography, other companies were actively forming their own companies and sending travelers to pursue the same goal. However, for these men, such as the company formed in St. Louis whose members consisted mainly of businessmen, Timbuktu was not a humanitarian goal or achievement. Timbuktu represented to these

---

<sup>70</sup> Foreign Quarterly Review, pg. 105

<sup>71</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 146

<sup>72</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 146

men an untapped market. They sought to “organise a caravan to introduce French goods into the interior of Africa and preferably Timbuctoo.”<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Welch, *Astounding*. pg.. 112

### Chapter III Caillié's Travels to Timbuktu

#### A. Moorish Identity

Determined to be detained no longer by agencies who were more interested in returns on their investment in their travelers than in the advancement of science, Caillié began preparing for the journey ahead of him. His eight months spent absorbing Moorish culture and practicing their habits provided Caillié with more insight than had been compiled by his predecessors, whose goal-oriented perspective of Timbuktu had caused them to overestimate their prowess and the official capacity of a foreign government among Moorish tribes. Traveling incognito as Abd-Allahi, Caillié needed to be cautious as he purchased goods to bring with him. Items like a compass which, although necessary, if discovered would have caused his fate to be added to the famous "Afrique Necrologique" map created by Henri Duveyrier of the Paris Geographical Society.<sup>74</sup> Caillié purchased the goods required for traveling and converted three hundred francs into gold and silver, which he placed on his girdle. On the May 22nd of 1827, "dressed in my Arabian costume, with my pockets filled with leaves torn out of the Koran," René Caillié embarked on his quest to discover Timbuktu.<sup>75</sup>

During his stay in Freetown, Caillié befriended a group of Mandingos in order to obtain information pertaining to the lands he wished to visit in his travels. Freetown offered Caillié relative safety to practice his story before committing himself due to the

---

<sup>74</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*. Vol. I pg. 149: Caillié spent 1700 of his 2000 francs he had saved. He purchased gunpowder, paper, sundry glass wares, tobacco, amber, coral, silk handkerchiefs, knives, scissors, looking-glasses, cloves, three pieces of Guinea stuff, and an umbrella. He also brought medicines: cream of tartar, jalap, calomel and different kinds of salts, sulphate of quinine, diachylon plaster, and nitrate of silver.

<sup>75</sup> Caillié. *Timbuktu*. Vol. I pg. 150



large white population. Taking lessons from his experience with the Braknas and other encounters with Moorish groups, Caillié drastically changed the details of his tale;

I told them one day, with a very mysterious air, and a charge of secrecy, that I was born in Egypt of Arabian parents, and that I had been carried into France by some soldiers of the French army which had invaded Egypt; that I had afterwards been brought to Senegal by my master, who in consideration of my services had given me my liberty. I added, that as I was now free, I felt a natural inclination to return to Egypt, to seek my relations, and to adopt the Mahometan religion.<sup>76</sup>

Caillié's ability to adapt to the situations around him and deviate from plans are apparent throughout his narrative; while being unsupported by a government had seemed a brief disaster, it now was a luxury for he was not under any obligation to represent a foreign entity, allowing him greater freedom especially concerning matters of religion. In the account Caillié would tell for the the rest of his journey there are careful details created to lower the barrier for him to gain easier acceptance. No longer was he claiming to be of French origin or to have undergone a religious epiphany and to be abandoning the sinful ways of Christian society. Instead, Caillié was claiming to be of Arabic descent and played into their antipathy towards Europeans by claiming to have been kidnapped by Napoleon's soldiers and brought back to France as a slave.<sup>77</sup> Caillié's intelligence is exemplified with this woven tale because it accounts for small details that could expose him not as an impostor but a dedicated Muslim trying to properly learn the ways of Mohammed. The smattering of Arabic and ability to recite verses from the Koran he had learned during his stay with the Braknas along with his Arabic dress helped to

---

<sup>76</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, pg. Vol. I pg.146

<sup>77</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg.145

authenticate his story. The journey wouldn't be easy for multiple reasons, one being his assumption of another identity for a year, and the cost of exposure would have been deadly. For five hundred and eight days Caillié trekked across vast deserts and steep rivers; surviving sand storms and scurvy he carried the overwhelming burden of having to always act a part. For seventeen months his life was one continuous subterfuge in which the greatest danger was not in the elements or African wildlife but in the risk of detection or self-betrayal.

#### B: Overview of his travels

Finally, wearing a simple hooded tunic, Caillié left Guinea in April 1827 to join merchant caravans. His inventory consisted of a small load of fabrics, beads, tobacco, powder, paper - plus the eternal umbrella and a compass.<sup>78</sup> Without much force, he pretended to be very needy so as not to excite envy. In addition, he invented a white lie to explain his hesitance in Arabic and his ignorance of Islam and its presence in the region. Egyptian by birth, he was taken in Senegal as a child by a member of the expedition Bonaparte. Now freed, he wished to regain his country and his religion. This fable had at least one immediate advantage: it elicited sympathy among Muslims, and evoking the traditional hospitality due to co-religionists.

On the 19th of April 1827, Caillié set out from Kakondy with a small caravan of Mandingoes. His route lay through the centre of the kingdom of Fouta Jallo, in a line midway between its two capitals of Teembo and Laby. This was a very elevated district, watered by the infant streams of the Senegal and Niger which descend from a still higher

---

<sup>78</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 149

region towards the South. It was a laborious route; steep, rocky, traversed by numerous ravines and torrents, and often obstructed by dense forests. It presented, however, many highly-picturesque views where the copious rivulets diffused a rich verdure over extensive tracts where the Foulahs fed numerous flocks. Fruits of various kinds, yams, and other vegetables, were also cultivated with success. Their agriculture, however, was conducted chiefly by slaves who were in general well-treated. Caillié, like other writers, describes the Foulahs as a fine and handsome people; attached to a pastoral life, but at the same time fond of war and excessively bigoted in religion.<sup>79</sup>

In his route through Fouta Jallo, Caillié crossed the Ba Fin not far from its source where it was still fordable, though it was a rapid and foaming stream about one hundred paces broad. About one hundred miles farther on, in the territory of Kankan, near the village of Couroussa, he came to the Niger, which had been a monumental moment in the travels of Mungo Park, “I once more saw the Niger rolling its immense stream along the plain.”<sup>80</sup> For Caillié, its significance was barely noted, so set was he on reaching Timbuktu and having to be fully immersed in his Moorish identity.

Kankan is described as an interesting place with 6,000 inhabitants surrounded by a quickset-hedge for the purpose of defense. The market, held three-times a week, was well supplied, not only with the native commodities of cloth, honey, wax, cotton, cattle and gold from the neighboring district of Bouré, but also with European articles brought from the coast.<sup>81</sup> The adjoining country Caillié described as fertile and highly cultivated. The Milo, a tributary to the Niger ran close by the town. To the north was the province of

---

<sup>79</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu. Vol. I pg. 184

<sup>80</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu Vol. II pg. 334

<sup>81</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. I pg. 249

Bouré, which Caillié represented as being more abundant in gold than any other in this part of Africa. Caillié remained at Kankan until he could find a caravan to guide him through Oussoulo, a country diversified by numerous little villages surrounded by highly-cultivated fields. The people in this country were described as being industrious, mild, humane, hospitable and though pagans, as feeling no enmity toward their Mohammedan neighbors.<sup>82</sup>

Beyond Ouassoulo lay the town of Sambatikila, whose inhabitants lived in voluntary poverty, bestowing little trouble on the cultivation of the ground, which they alleged would distract from the study of the Koran, a statement that Caillié claimed was justly derided as only a specious cloak for indolence.<sup>83</sup> From there, Caillié traveled to Timé, a country situated in a fertile territory that was profusely irrigated and yielded abundantly various fruits and vegetables, which were scarce or unknown on the coast. Among these were the shea or butter-tree, and the kolla or goora nuts, which were a great luxury and conveyed in large quantities into the interior.<sup>84</sup> The victuals, however, were found to be bland, owing to the almost total absences of salt. Caillié was detained at Timé upward of five month due to severe illness.<sup>85</sup> On January 9<sup>th</sup> 1826 he joined a caravan for Jenne and proceeded through a district that was generally well cultivated and contained a number of considerable villages, until, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, he came in view, near the village of Cougalia, of the Niger, which appeared to him only about five hundred feet broad, but very deep, flowing gently through a flat and open country.<sup>86</sup> The caravan

---

<sup>82</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 255

<sup>83</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 250

<sup>84</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 317

<sup>85</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 335

<sup>86</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 443

sailed across it and, after traveling six miles and passing by rather deep fords and two smaller branches, they entered the city of Jenne, one of the most important and celebrated cities in Central Africa and which had never before been visited by a European.

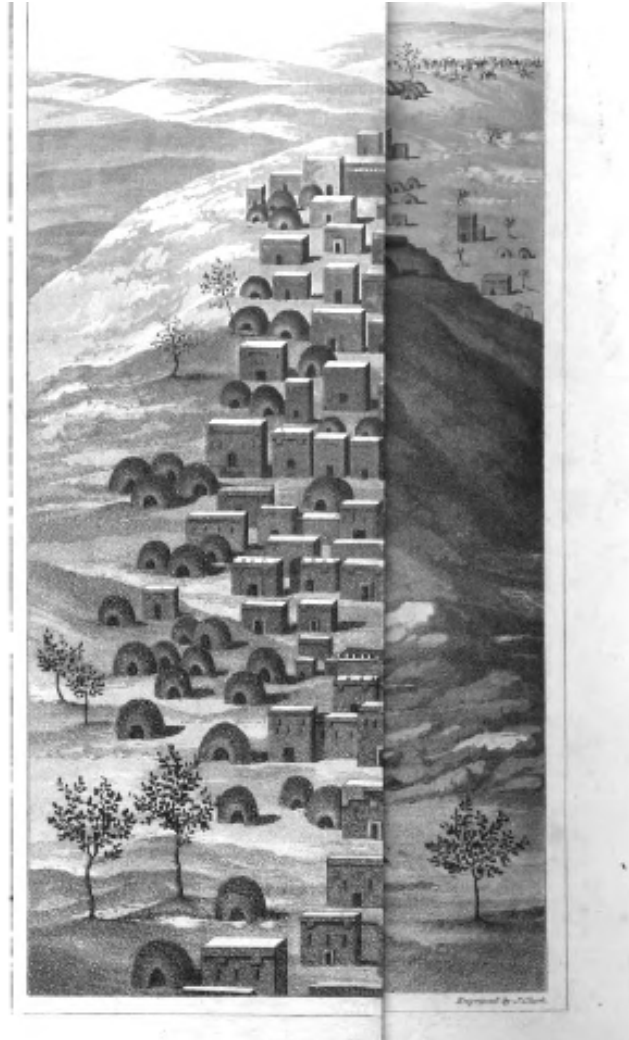
Jenne is described by Caillié as situated at the eastern extremity of a branch of the Niger separated below Sego from the main current, with which, after passing the former city, it again unites. This delineation was questioned by the English who claimed that if such a branch existed, it would have been observed by Park, who on the contrary describes the river which passes Jenne as a separate stream, tributary to the Niger. The population of Jenne was estimated by Caillié at 8,000 to 10,000, consisting of various African tribes, attracted by the extensive commerce of which Jenne was the centre. The four principal were the Foulahs, Mandingoes, Bambaras, and the Moors.<sup>87</sup> The trade of Jenne was chiefly held in the hands of thirty or forty Moorish merchants, who often united in partnership, and maintained communication with Timbuktu. The markets were filled with products of the surrounding country, either for exportation or consumption--cloth, grain, fruits, kolla-nuts, meat, fish, gold from Bouré and numerous slaves. These commodities drew in return from Timbuktu, salt, Indian cloths, fire-arms, beads, and a variety of European articles.<sup>88</sup> On 23rd of March, Caillié left Jenne, near which he embarked on the Joliba. Caillié passed first through the country of Banan and on April 2nd, the river opened into the great Lake Dinnie on which which Caillié observed three islands. After leaving this lake he remarked that the Niger flowed through a country

---

<sup>87</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 447

<sup>88</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. I pg. 456

thinly occupied by Foulah shepherds, and Moorish Tuaricks. On the 19th of April he arrived at Cabra, the port of Timbuktu.<sup>89</sup>



90

C: Timbuktu and Major Laing

---

<sup>89</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu Vol. II pg. 44

<sup>90</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. 74- Caillié's depiction of the mythical Timbuktu

On the evening of April 20th, Caillié, with some companions, rode from Cabra and entered Timbuktu. Caillié describes himself as struck with an extraordinary and joyful emotion at the view of this mysterious city, so long the object of curiosity to the civilized nations of Europe.<sup>91</sup> The scene, however, presented little of the grandeur and wealth with which the name had been associated. It was comprised of only a heap of ill-built earthen houses, all around which were spread immense plains of moving sand.<sup>92</sup> Timbuktu, in comparison to Jenne, faltered. According to Caillié it consisted of large houses chiefly inhabited by Moorish merchants and straw-huts occupied by negroes of the city.<sup>93</sup> Within Timbuktu there were seven mosques, of which the principal one was very extensive, having three galleries, each two-hundred feet long with a tower upwards of fifty feet high.<sup>94</sup> One part, apparently more ancient than the rest and almost falling into ruin, was thought to exhibit a style of architecture decidedly superior to the more modern buildings.<sup>95</sup> Caillié revealed that Timbuktu was supported entirely by commerce. It was the depot of the salt conveyed from the mines of Taudeny and of European goods brought by caravans from Morocco.<sup>96</sup> These goods then embarked for Jenne, to be exchanged for the gold, slaves, and provisions with which Timbuktu was exclusively reliant on Jenne for. Caillié discusses the wandering tribe of the Tuaregs who harassed the country and levied a regular tax on the caravans.<sup>97</sup> Caillié's dreams of glitzy city and full of gold died. Since its peak in the sixteenth century, the ancient capital had lost its splendor. Its

---

<sup>91</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 48

<sup>92</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 49

<sup>93</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 50

<sup>94</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 75

<sup>95</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 74

<sup>96</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 57

<sup>97</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 59

only resource was salt and it imported all the basic necessities from Djenne, the port of Kabra, where unload the canoes from the south. The Tuaregs, masters of the city, collected various taxes. While the streets of the city were pleasant with many mosques, for Caillié, who had high expectations of the city that had haunted his dreams, disillusionment was cruel.

In addition, Caillié learned that he was preceded by Alexander Gordon Laing, a Scottish traveler who was murdered on his way home after being expelled from Timbuktu.<sup>98</sup> Caillié, while in Timbuktu, was able to see the house Laing, his former rival, had lodged in as well as have talks with his landlord and learned the details surrounding his death. These details would provide closure for England, as they had lost contact with the Major shortly before he had arrived at Timbuktu and were unaware of whether he was dead or alive. What Caillié learned served further to validate his own methods and reinforce the importance of his mission and the reality of the danger he was in daily;

He told me that...Laing, never laid aside his European dress, and used to give out that he had been sent by his master the King of England, for the purpose of making himself acquainted with Timbuctoo and the wonders it contains. It would appear that the traveller had openly taken a plan of Timbuctoo, for the same Moor told me in his simple way that *he had written down everything in it*.<sup>99</sup>

Interestingly enough, in the footnotes of the Caillié's translated account it challenges the report that Caillié published regarding the actions of Major Laing, doubting that an English traveler would have conducted himself in such a brazen manner.<sup>100</sup> Again, the tensions existing between England and France are exemplified with these strong opinions

---

<sup>98</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. 70

Caillié also professes his belief that the "Tooariks" also murdered Mungo Park

<sup>99</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. 80

<sup>100</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. 80



challenging the veracity of Caillié. While Caillié may have criticized Laing's methods and manners of travel, there is no doubt to the respect he had for Laing especially regarding the conditions of his death. Had Laing renounced Christianity to the Tuaregs bargaining for his life, his existence according to Caillié would have been doomed, "he would have been the slave of merciless barbarians, and exposed to all the miseries and dangers to that country." However, the English explorer chose death, and Caillié was awed by "the resolution of Major Laing was perhaps at once a proof of intrepidity and of foresight."<sup>101</sup>

Caillié left Timbuktu on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, and in six days arrived at Aroan which he deemed a well-built town, supported entirely by the passage of caravans from Barbary and the salt-mines of Taudeny. He would depart from El-Arawan on the 19th of May in company with a caravan of 120 camels laden with the productions of Soudan.<sup>102</sup> Ahead of him was the prospect of crossing a desert in ten days without much water, "before us appeared a horizon without bounds, in which our eyes distinguished only an immense plain of burning sand, enveloped by a sky on fire. At this spectacle the camels raised long cries, and the slaves mournfully lifter their eyes to heaven." Caillié however, continued with spirits high due to the knowledge that he was the first European who would cross the desert from the southern side. After eighty-one days Caillié emerged from the Western Sahara, having completed what he imagined to be the harshest aspect of his travels in the blazing desert.<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. 84

<sup>102</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. 109

<sup>103</sup> Welch, The Unveiling of Timbuctoo. pg. 319

Caillié throughout his travels in Africa clung to his Moorish identity for his fate if he wavered would have been similar to that of the late Major Laing. His disguise was not perfect, something that his critics would point out. Caillié continually had to defend his story and prove his commitment to the Islamic faith, something that a true covert identity would have no need to do. Traveling with caravans and specific tribes over a period-of-time as Caillié did allowed him the benefit of building levels of familiarity and trust that allowed his identity's deficiencies to be forgotten by his Moorish companions. Upon entering Morocco, Caillié's wits were tested to new extremes as he was now attempting to pass through to the coast in what was one of the most religiously fanatical areas, "it would attract dangerous notice to him in a country where his masquerade was increasingly the subject to the intelligent suspicions of men, some of whom were familiar with Europeans, some of whom might have seen real Egyptians".<sup>104</sup> Caillié thus found his story for the first time scrutinized in a manner he was unaccustomed to. Its individual components were analyzed instead of the religious aspects. A Moor by the name Sidi Boubacer was an aficionado and collector of curiosities and knowledge. According to Caillié this man possessed probably the only pocket watch in the whole country. Interestingly enough, Boubacer also owned a pocket compass that Caillié believed to have been that of the late Major Laing.<sup>105</sup> Boubacer was also an arithmetic enthusiast and was eager to learn from Caillié more mathematical operations. This natural intelligence and scientific mind found immediately a flaw with Caillié's story that had not yet been discovered;

---

<sup>104</sup> Welch, *The Unveiling of Timbutoo*. pg. 319

<sup>105</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 178

He talked of Bonaparte and his campaigns in Egypt, asked if it was during his residence among the Musulmans that I was made a prisoner, and said that he was at Tripoli about that time; finally he inquired my age; as I was covered with rags, was ill, and my complexion scorched to almost blackness by the heat of the sun, I appeared older than I really was; he had therefore no difficulty believing that I was thirty-four years of age.<sup>106</sup>

Caillié by claiming to have been kidnapped as a boy by Napoleon's armies should have been in his thirties but in reality he was only twenty-eight and one misspoken word or action away from being discovered. As he continued to Tangier, Caillié's situation became more dire as he was not only unable to contact the French Consul to be afforded respite but the very action of seeking out the French Consul was a danger, for "Tangier was the most fanatical spot in all Africa...At Tangier lived descendants of the Moors who had raped Europe. It was in their blood to hate every Christian."<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, Caillié trekked forward sleeping in cemeteries rather than risk being caught exchanging English money and being exposed. In Tangier, he finally managed to present himself to the consul of France, a M. Delaporte whom was overjoyed at the presence of Caillié, "he gave free vent to the joy with which my almost miraculous escape from the dangers of so arduous a journey."<sup>108</sup> In his account, Caillié holds no recriminations toward the actions of M. Delaporte which resulted in Caillié having to seek shelter once more in the dangerous streets of Tangier due to, "the full extent of the danger which surrounded me, from the fear which M. Delaporte expressed of the difficulties which must embarrass my departure from this country."<sup>109</sup> After expressing his joy and gratitude at the dangers

---

<sup>106</sup> Caillié Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. 178

<sup>107</sup> Welch, The Unveiling of Timbuctoo. pg 329

<sup>108</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II. pg. 219

<sup>109</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II. pg. 219

which Caillié had undertaken and survived for France, he promptly turned Caillié back onto the streets of Tangiers still disguised as a Moor. Delaporte's rationale for this was that Caillié had been observed entering the consul and if his identity became known before they were able to smuggle him safely back to France it, "would have roused question, and Caillié would have been seized by the indignant population."<sup>110</sup> Eventually, Delaporte would be able to offer refuge for the weary traveller who for the first time in over a year was able to shed the clothes of Abdallahi and after "returning thanks to Almighty God, [able to] lay down upon a good bed, rejoicing in [his] escape from the society of men debased by ignorance and fanaticism."<sup>111</sup>

Caillié would spend seventeen days hidden in the safety of the consulate as they plotted a return to France which involved Caillié being smuggled aboard a French naval ship as a sailor. While Delaporte was using his political connections to arrange the transport, Caillié used the time to recover his weary body and to arrange his notes from traveling. It was during this transition that Caillié was reminded further of the tense political relationship between England and France over the discovery of Timbuktu. Doubtless, throughout his journey Caillié must have reminisced over how his travels would have been affected by the English patronage which he had been denied and later rejoiced at not having to betray his nationality. During those days in the Sahara traveling, or at each Moorish tribe scrambling to recite passages from the Koran, even having to bring attention to theft of his items due to the absolute poverty with which he was traveling Caillié must have wondered how patronage could have made the journey more bearable with basic comforts. After reclaiming his identity in Tangier, Caillié was

---

<sup>110</sup> Welch, *The Unveiling of Timbuctoo* .pg. 334

<sup>111</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 221

approached by a French Jew “who was thoroughly imbued with the principles of his race and had no ideas but for the advancement of his interests,” and attempted to persuade Caillié to sell his account to the English.<sup>112</sup> According to this French Jew, England was prepared to offer a reward of twenty-five thousand pounds sterling for Caillié’s travels. Those doubting Caillié’s patriotism or loyalty because he adopted the customs of Moorish tribes were reassured at this point in the narrative as he proudly stated that he was a Frenchman, and though “the recompense to be derived from the French government would undoubtedly be less considerable; but I should not hesitate a single moment to offer to my native country and my king the homage of my modest labours.”<sup>113</sup> English critics reading Caillié’s account would claim, his nationalism was fabricated to placate the Paris Geographical Society and solidify his newest identity as a French hero for the discovery of Timbuktu. As early as December, the Geographical Society honored him with a price of nine thousand francs plus three thousand francs from the Department of the Navy. In one year he would publish his account in France which would then be translated for England in 1830. This account would consist of his personal narrative, featuring also a map and geographic notations included by Edme Jomard.

---

<sup>112</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*. Vol. II pg.. 222

<sup>113</sup> Caillié, *Timbuktu*, Vol. II pg. 222

## Chapter IV. Reception

### A. Paris' Commission to authenticate his account

October 8th 1928, after a ten day voyage disguised as a sailor, René Caillié arrived in France, officially ending his travels in Africa. Caillié's relief at being able to assume his identity again was palpable, "only those men who have been a long time away from their native land, and have feared never to go back to it, can understand how I felt at seeing my dear homeland again."<sup>114</sup> Due to the importance of Caillié's journey and the monetary value of the prize he was claiming he had to submit to an investigation by a committee that had been designated to "ascertain the facts resulted from the travels of M.

---

<sup>114</sup> Welch, *The Unveiling of Timbuctoo* .pg. 341

Auguste Caillié in the interior of Africa.”<sup>115</sup> This special committee consisted of six men, Messieurs’ Eyriés, Cadet de Metz, Amédée Jaubert, Larenaudière, Baron Roger and Monsieur Jomard whose job was to satisfy themselves on the veracity of Caillié’s report and whether he fulfilled the conditions of the program set out by the Paris Geographical Society.<sup>116</sup> Before delving further into their report, it is essential to understand the program offered by the Paris Geographical Society for it was the impetus of this agenda that was the catalyst for Caillié to begin his travels.

France’s intention with offering a reward was for penetration into the interior of Africa via Senegal, more specifically a route closest to the French settlements in Senegal, “such an enterprise, if successful would not be without profit to our commercial industry.”<sup>117</sup> The intensity of curiosity surrounding Timbuktu during this time prompted numerous donors from government entities to offer rewards for any traveler able to survive the hardships of the journey.

The Society demands a manuscript narrative, with a geographical map, founded upon celestial observations. The author shall endeavor to study the country with reference to the principal points of its physical geography. He shall observe the nature of the soil, the depth of the wells, their temperature and that of their sources, the width and rapidity of the rivers, the colour and the clearness of their waters, and the productions of the countries which they irrigate. He shall make remarks upon the climates, and determine in various places, if possible, the declination and inclination of the magnetic needle. He shall strive to observe the different breeds of animals, and to make some collections in natural history, such as fossils, shells, and plants.

---

<sup>115</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. 451

<sup>116</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol II pg. 451

<sup>117</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol II pg. 447

When he shall have arrived at Timbuctoo, if he cannot go further, he shall acquaint himself with the routes leading to Kachnah, Houssa, Bournou, and lake Tsaad, to Walet, Tischit, and even the coast of Guinea. He shall collect the most accurate itineraries he can procure, and consult the best informed inhabitants upon that part of the course of the Dhioliba which he cannot see for himself.

In observing the people, he shall take care to examine their manners, ceremonies, customs, weapons, laws, religion, food, diseases, the colour of their skin, the form of their face, the nature of their hair, and also the different articles of their commerce. It is desirable that he should form vocabularies of their idioms, compared with the French language; finally that he should make drawings of the details of their habitations, and take plans of towns whenever it is possible to do so.

The committee, overjoyed that a Frenchman had succeeded where so many explorers, particularly those who were English-funded had failed, formally announced Caillié's account to be genuine, "The committee is struck with the tone of simplicity and sincerity which reigns throughout his narrative, and which will not admit a doubt of the reality and authenticity of his different excursions."<sup>118</sup> The committee was able to maneuver around deficits in Caillié's account that the British would be quick to point out. They congratulated Caillié on his "imperfect method" of measuring and mapping his route because of the length of his journey corresponds with those distances of places that were already known. He, they acknowledged completed the first part of their program which asked for particulars respecting Timbuktu and its eastern countries. However, the second part of the program is where the committee revealed the weakness in Caillié's account which they were able to overlook,

The second part, for which the Society offered a special prize, exacted, it is true, astronomical observations; but it is questionable, whether any one

---

<sup>118</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. 451



penetrating for the first time into this country, even if provided with the necessary instruments, could possibly fulfill conditions so difficult and dangerous. Who is there but is acquainted with the savage jealousy which the moors and all those in possession of the commerce of this part of Africa, have from the earliest ages conceived against Europeans?<sup>119</sup>

Caillié had departed on his journey without the patronage of any geographical organization and his success shocked them. During his travels they were still engaged in the race to claim Timbuktu first and since the publication of the Paris Geographical Society's program in 1824 much of the information sought for had been fulfilled partially by English explorers, "namely those which relate to the districts east and E.S.E of Timbuktu" This allowed them to justify waiving Caillié of that responsibility, "for we had, therefore, no longer the same motives for requiring their accomplishment."<sup>120</sup> Despite the decidedly unscientific nature of Caillié's narrative, the Committee found themselves satisfied with the authenticity of his account as well as his description of Timbuktu. Once verified by the Committee, France was able to claim the glory of Timbuktu for France. However, to their chagrin most likely, their new hero refused any assistance in the writing of his narrative and the world had to wait a year for the full details.

#### B. Reception to his Narrative

Caillié's name became famous, but the French were able to claim his accomplishments for their own glory. However, England was not as receptive to the Caillié's account and shunned it on suspicion of him having stolen the writings of Major

---

<sup>119</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol II pg. 450

<sup>120</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu Vol. II, pg. 460

Laing. It is true that Caillié was not the first European to enter Timbuktu, but he was the first to come out alive. The French lauded him; the English criticized. Behind the quarrel, we see the intense rivalry between the two nations, which goes far beyond the single case of Timbuktu. Rene Caillié was therefore praised by his country which shamelessly appropriated his company. Far from having acted as "France", he worked alone, ignored by all until his success. Paradoxically, it is likely that this isolation is the quintessential reason for Caillié's success. Indeed, his anonymity assured that safety recommendation letters and other travel expenses would have compromised his disguise. His predecessor in Timbuktu, Major Gordon Laing, was a victim of both his honesty and his national pride. The system afforded Caillié one drawback, the constant fear of being discovered which in turn provided incentive to exercise the utmost discretion.

But this flattering success raised adversaries against me: some alleged that I had never reached Timbuktu; others, that I had been shipwrecked on the coast of Barbary, and having obtained possession of some vague intelligence respecting the interior of the country, had imposed it upon the public for the results of my personal observations. I have been even accused of changing my religion at every station. To this malevolent imputation, I answer" that I externally adopted the forms of Mahometan worship as the only means of penetrating into the countries through which I have traveled -- an achievement which, without this acquiescence, would have been impracticable, except by encountering at every step the hazard of death, and inevitably suffering it at last. I must confess that these unjust attacks have affected me more sensibly than all the hardships, fatigues, and privations, which I have encountered in the interior of Africa.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> Caillié, Vol. II, pg. 223-224

The majority of these ‘unjust attacks’ that Caillié was referring to were the result of Sir John Barrow, the Second Secretary at the Admiralty. Whereas the general public’s reception to Caillié’s account was lackluster due to the rambling nature of his narrative, apparent to most readers to be an honest account of an uneducated man, in London Caillié’s inconstancies throughout his account were viewed in a more devious light due to the intense nationalistic rivalry. In 1830, The Foreign Quarterly Review published their review of Caillié’s account. It was not kind to say the least. They were not oblivious to the political scandal erupting over the late Major Laing’s missing papers and dismissed the possibility that Caillié played a role in that as “preposterous” for had those documents passed through his hands “they would bear the impress of his inquisitive, vigorous, and intelligent mind.”<sup>122</sup> This was not the case. From start to end, the narrative was singularly the work of an uneducated but curious man, to whom the errors and mistakes are consistent with these characteristics. The repetitions, discrepancies, incongruities, contradictions, are just such as might be expected from a person supplying an imperfect and half-erased journal, “On my arrival in Paris, the notes, written mostly in pencil, were found so faint and so much effaced by time.”<sup>123</sup> Caillié’s preface to the second volume apologizes from many of the criticisms that would be laid against him, acknowledging his lack of proper supplies, time and the luxury to observe and make notations of his surroundings for as he stated in his wallet he carried a certain death if the Moors discovered his notes. He would be recognized by England for his achievements, “We certainly do admire the patience, endurance and enterprise of an illiterate man

---

<sup>122</sup> Foreign Quarterly Review. *Caillié’s Travels in Africa*. London: Truettel and Wurtz, Truettel, and Richter: 1830: Vol. VI. pg. 117

<sup>123</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. vii

undertaking an enterprise to gratify his curiosity and pride, without the possibility of any beneficial result accruing to science from his labours.”<sup>124</sup> The severe limitations with which Caillié was accredited however can be attributed to the pre-existing rivalry between England and France, particularly the role of Caillié’s editor, Jomard, not an unknown name to the African Association. Caillié bestowed lavish praise upon Jomard throughout his narrative, “who has not disdained to unite his name with mine, and has so largely contributed to any success with which this narrative may be honoured.”<sup>125</sup> In the eyes of England, Jomard contributed too much to Caillié’s memory with what they considered leading questions during his interrogation by the Committee where he professed his memory to be less than adequate in regards to many of the details.<sup>126</sup>

The Foreign Quarterly Review determined the honesty of Caillié’s personal narrative despite the scientific errors he made, particularly those involving astronomy and constellations; “I observed the stars describe their course; I remarked in the east the group of stars so remarkable, called the Constellation of Orion; I still observed it nearly in the middle of its course almost in our zenith.” To their readers, they delighted in asking them to “rectify a globe” for the latitude of eighteen degrees north would have the satisfaction in exposing Caillié’s mistake. Where they would be unwaveringly firm however was in the Geographical notes and maps that were attached to Caillié’s narrative which they considered to be purely the fabrication of the Paris Geographic Society, and particularly Jomard. A pre-existing academic vendetta is exposed against Jomard, “the name of Jomard...is well known to English readers for among other things, from reiterated charges

---

<sup>124</sup> Foreign Quarterly Review, pg. 117

<sup>125</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. ix

<sup>126</sup> Caillié, Timbuktu, Vol. II pg. vii

brought against him of plundering, without acknowledgment, our most valuable periodicals, and presenting the original information contained therein to support hypotheses of his own.”<sup>127</sup> The English exhibited no qualms at levying such a charge against Jomard, “there is nothing, very monstrous in our supposition that the atlas before us was produced in the same way. If this map, constructed by Jomard upon Caillié’s data, is to be regarded as correct, then every preceding geographer and traveller has toiled in vain.”<sup>128</sup> Looking at Caillié’s inventory and his own account they furnished evidence to support their claims. Caillié self-admitted that he did not possess either astronomical instruments or a watch with which to measure time; all measurements he would take along his travels were estimated by him from his own self-experiments. He deduced the latitude of Timbuktu by measuring the shadow it cast at midday. To the abject horror of the Foreign Quarterly Review, despite these inaccurate systems of measurement the routes traversed by Caillié published in the attached section of the narrative and his measure latitude of Timbuktu “agree most harmoniously with the itineraries published by other travelers, and the latitude of Timbuktu differs only one minute.”<sup>129</sup>

For England, Caillié’s credibility was tarnished irrevocably due to numerous factors, of which the majority was leveled against the conduct of the Paris Geographical Society whom they claimed forced the account to a prominence not deserved in order to claim larger fame. Because of their and particularly the actions of Jomard, Caillié’s reputation was forever linked with his and instead of being welcomed by any government to be given the proper instruction to be enlisted for the further advancement of science;

---

<sup>127</sup> Foreign Quarterly Review, pg. 117

<sup>128</sup> Foreign Quarterly Review, pg. 117

<sup>129</sup> Foreign Quarterly Review, pg. 117

“whereas now we think that the cloud of suspicion which hangs over him will never be dispelled, for we see no method by which to separate the true statements of Caillié from the fabrications of his editor.”<sup>130</sup>

### C. Laing v. Caillié

Jomard declared him the ‘incarnation of geography,’ and France hailed him as an international hero.<sup>131</sup> England, specifically the African Association, was infuriated at the concept that the glory of discovering Timbuktu had been captured by an uneducated Frenchman. Caillié himself professed that he was not a skilled writer and he thanked the Paris Geographical Society for their patience in the year it took him to write his account. As a narrative, Caillié’s account is very disjointed which served to help the dubious rumors spread about the veracity of his account. It contained statements that were not in accordance with previous statements about Timbuktu. From England there was a surge of critics who declared that Caillié had never been in Timbuktu. Instead they claimed he had derived his information either from a native’s report or from the missing papers of Major Laing, of which Baron Rousseau, French Consul at Tripoli, had in some way villainously possessed himself, and used his illiterate countryman to gain for France the glory which England was due.<sup>132</sup>

England had placed high hopes on Major Laing who would become the most neglected of the African explorers, mainly because he did not survive to publish his account but also because of the effect of Caillié’s account. Exposed to the truth that Timbuktu was not even the palest shadow of the city abounding in wealth and

---

<sup>130</sup> Foreign Quarterly Review, pg. 117

<sup>131</sup> Welch, The Unveiling of Timbuctoo. pg. 343

<sup>132</sup> Gardner, Brian. The Quest for Timbuktu. London: Cassell & Company LTD, 1968: pg. 136

architectural glories that they had imagined, the disillusioned British public had no wish to hear of Laing and he thus sunk into obscurity. While the general public at this time may have dismissed Laing, he was very much relevant in the rivalry between England and France. The sordid tale of the alleged theft of the missing papers by the French Consul in Tripoli and the suspected complicity of the Bashaw in Laing's murder would overshadow for many Caillié's accomplishments.<sup>133</sup>

#### D. John Barrow- The most adamant critic

Barrow's rejection of Caillié's claims was an extreme response, but his comments hinted at a much wider ethical and moral question about how and why exploration should be conducted. A key fault with Caillié was his use of disguise and subterfuge as methods of exploration. This deception according to Barrow was immoral, reprehensible, and cowardly. Whatever the veracity of Caillié's claims, the manner in which he had acquired his information was morally suspect, "M.Caillié sets out by practising a deception....one who is thus ready at invention at first could find no difficulty in improving as he proceeded."<sup>134</sup> Barrow's attack on Caillié's methods was self-serving and profoundly disingenuous, for the African Association had consistently argued that for the lone explorer, traveling incognito was the most effective exploratory agent. Barrow countered that the limited success thus far in exploration of Africa was because too many travelers were convinced of the ideal of the lone, invisible traveler.

The quarrel that Barrow incited against Caillié but more specifically the Paris Geographical Society was not about the efficacy of alternative methods of exploration. Rather, it was based upon a moral argument that exploration relying on subterfuge and

---

<sup>133</sup> Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuktu*, pg. 137

<sup>134</sup> *Foreign Quarterly Review*, pg. 453-454

pretense was unethical and yielded morally suspect information. From Barrow's perspective, military uniforms or, at the very least, European clothes and customs, were the necessary manly accretions of the real explorer. Without them, the traveler was reduced to the level of a mere onlooker. Barrow's opposition to disguise was sustained by his related conviction that Europeans in Africa should not hide their Christian faith. In British critiques of Caillié it was argued that his use of disguise made the process of traveling too easy. Caillié's ambition to claim a monetary prize was in itself a suspect motivation for traveling. For the British, Geographical knowledge was only valid if it was painfully acquired. If necessary, the ultimate sacrifice had to be made. The British stance on the motivation for traveling can be understood in terms of their own monetary investment and high cost of life that needed to be justified to their subscribers. Since the founding of the African Association, over eighteen million pounds had been invested into these expeditions. Caillié's method of traveling deliberately sought to limit the more heroic forms of discomfort he would otherwise have experienced as a European in Africa by choosing the safer and less manly options of servitude, humiliation, and indenture.

Barrow and other critics sought to denigrate Caillié through the promotion of the tragic Laing, the real hero of Timbuktu according to Barrow. Laing was the very model of heroic honesty, claimed his supporters. He had traveled under no deceptions, but as an Englishman and a Christian. Barrow invoked Laing's letter to Hamner Warrington, British Consul in Tripoli as evidence of the British explorer's cheerful and selfless heroism in the face of appalling adversity:

I have suffered much, but the detail must be reserved till another period...; in the meantime I shall acquaint you with the number and nature of my wounds, in all amounting to twenty-four, eighteen of which are exceedingly severe. To begin from



the top: I have five sabre cuts on the crown of my head and three on the left temple, all fractures from which much bone has come away; one on my left cheek, which fractured the jaw bone and divided the ear, forming a very unsightly wound; one over the right temple and a dreadful gash on the back of the neck, which slightly scratched the windpipe; a musket ball in the hip, which made its way through my back, slightly grazing the backbone; five sabre cuts on my right arm and hand, three of the fingers broken, the hand cut three-fourths across, and the wrist bones cut through; three cuts on the left arm, the bone of which has been broken but is again uniting; one slight wound on the right leg and two with one dreadful gash on the left, to say nothing of a cut across the fingers of my left hand, now healed up. I am nevertheless doing well.<sup>135</sup>

One can only imagine what Laing's more detailed account of his wounds and journey may have entailed. Caillié himself referenced the stories circulating in Timbuktu about Laing's terrible injuries when the Scotsman had entered the city only months before Caillié. These stories were a reason why Caillié hastened his departure from the city, not wishing to follow the unfortunate Laing's demise. The critiques of Caillié's journey in fact had little to do with the substance of his account and rather focused on a larger moral question of traveling, in which it was claimed Caillié and Laing were dichotomous to each other. Laing was the epitome of manly virtue whereas Caillié had demeaned himself by traveling as a Moor, which, according to *The Foreign Quarterly Review*; "laying aside the religious question, on which there cannot be two opinions, we are bold enough to doubt if the advantage compensate the risk."<sup>136</sup> "To profess Mohammedanism and act like a Christian is impossible, at least for a white man. To embrace Islamism is to embrace its ignorance."<sup>137</sup> Caillié knew the risk of his mode of travel in terms of its

---

<sup>135</sup> Kryza, *The Race for Timbuktu*. pg. 203-204

<sup>136</sup> *Foreign Quarterly Review*, pg. 102

<sup>137</sup> *Foreign Quarterly Review*, pg. 101

reception in Europe and he throughout the narrative reasserts his Christianity though it does little to appease those who believe he converted.

Conclusion:

Caillié's narrative did not dash the mystique surrounding Timbuktu, instead it encouraged further expeditions due to the scandal of his discovery, and England believed that his account was a fake. Timbuktu was still regarded as an essential link in the mystery of the Niger River and it would fall to another traveler to give an incontrovertible account of Timbuktu. It would until twenty-five years later that the veracity of his account was accepted on the whole. Heinrich Barth would come to represent the ideal traveler that served as a future model for explorers in Africa. He was thorough in his preparations; he devoted himself to reading all the known literature of Central Africa and Timbuktu while even undergoing a physical regiment to prepare his body for the hardships of the journey.<sup>138</sup> In 1853 Heinrich Barth, England's German traveler would follow in Laing and Caillié's footsteps through the gates of Timbuktu confirming the accuracy of his account. Barth, further remarked

Following close upon the track of the enterprising and intelligent but unfortunate Major Laing... Caillié naturally excited against himself the jealousy of the English, to whom it could not but seem extraordinary that a poor unprotected adventurer like himself should succeed where one of the most courageous and noble-minded officers of their army had succumbed.<sup>139</sup>

Following publication of Barth's account the Caillié controversy quickly faded out as the world geographical societies namely England, Paris and Germany grappled with new

---

<sup>138</sup> Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuktu*. pg. 159

<sup>139</sup> Welch, *The Unveiling of Timbuctoo*. pg. 345

information of the continent of Africa and the incontrovertible evidence that Timbuktu was a dreary and unimportant place unworthy of the hype. Caillié would never have a chance to bask in the knowledge that his life's work had been vindicated for he had died in 1838.<sup>140</sup>

Without doubt, Timbuktu had needed to be discovered by the Europeans, but now it ceased to possess the mysterious aura that had lured numerous explorers, often to their own demise. Now Timbuktu was seen as a stage in the journey rather than the object of the journey itself. Europe began to refocus on the course of the Niger River. The British government was also stimulated to fresh exertions to continue the work it had begun, although it was the Niger and not Timbuktu which was the object of travelers after 1853. In 1881 the French conquest of Western Africa began to occur and in 1894 Major Joseph Joffre would complete his orders to occupy Timbuktu making it an outpost of the French Colonial Empire.<sup>141</sup>

The race for Timbuktu confirms that the attempts to traverse these uncharted territories and reach an undiscovered place were manifestly a political and scientific project, the outcome of geopolitical conflict between rival nation-states as well as the object of scientific curiosity. However, as shown with Timbuktu, the competing claims to this new knowledge were judged according to non-scientific criteria which were based as much on the traveler himself and his background as the actual results. Throughout the race, British and French geographical communities promoted alternative champions in the race for Timbuktu, and each one would claim 'victory' in the contest by asserting

---

<sup>140</sup> Welch, *The Unveiling of Timbuctoo*. pg. 351

<sup>141</sup> Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuktu* pg. 191

Joffre would become known for his heroics in World War I at the Battle of the Marne.

different interpretations of the rules governing exploration. The Laing-Caillié controversy demonstrates that the justification of the ends and means were not easily separated, and that truth could be articulated in conflicting scientific and moral terms. As Europe began building their Colonial Empires in Africa, justification of occupations became embedded in the history of exploration as both England and France looked to justify their presences and ownership over particular territories.<sup>142</sup> Caillié's work would find itself being scrutinized as both countries began to redraw the maps of Africa. An area deserving of further research is the rivalry that did exist between the Paris Geographical Society and the African Association for even in secondary sources of the topic today the bitterness between the two's explorations are evident.<sup>143</sup> Because of this rivalry and how its permeated into the published accounts of the times, we are able to see how geographic knowledge of Africa developed not as a result of the heroic actions of disinterested scientists operating without regard to social, cultural, or political factors. Rather, the attempts to traverse previously uncharged territories and the glory of discovering a mythical city was manifestly a political project of which the outcome further fueled geopolitical conflict between rival England and France. Despite their claims to be searching for scientific truths due to the nature of publication of travelers accounts we see an ulterior motive when publishing about Timbuktu. Whilst both the African Association and the Paris Geographical Society sought to dispel the wilder claims involving Timbuktu, both organizations required the romanticized speculations about the city in order to generating public interest in an area of enormous potential for European capital

---

<sup>142</sup> Sattin, Anthony. *The Gates of Africa*. pg 353

<sup>143</sup> Yet, little is written of the two organizations bitter history with each other.

for continued justification of their costly expeditions. Laing, Caillié, Barth and all the travelers preceding them were pawns representing the larger commercial aspirations of their organizations as opposed to agents of science and truth.

## Bibliography

Caillié, René. *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo and Across the Great Desert to Morocco: Performed in the Years 1824-1828*. London: Harry Colburn & Richard Bentley. Vol. I. 1830

Caillié, René. *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo and Across the Great Desert to Morocco: Performed in the Years 1824-1828*. London: Harry Colburn & Richard Bentley. Vol. II. 1830

Gardner, Brian. *The Quest for Timbuctoo*. London: Cassell & Company LTD, 1968.

Kryza, Frank T. *The Race for Timbuktu*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Sattin, Anthony. *The Gates of Africa*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.

Welch, Galbraith. *The Unveiling of Timbuctoo; the Astounding Adventures of Caillié*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers Inc, 1939.